



On My Own 1917

The first thing next morning, I asked for an appointment to see Secretary Lane as soon as possible. I was standing before him about twenty minutes later.

Lane listened intently to me, only interrupting when he needed more information on some point I made. I told him everything I could remember, holding back nothing, dating back six months or so as I kept recalling Mr. Mather's unusual behavior from time to time.

When I fell silent at last, he seemed deeply sympathetic and moved by the sadness of the situation. He appeared to roll the facts around in his head and finally asked: "Albright, you know this man better than anyone. Do you think he will ever be well enough to assume his duties back here? Would the strain be too much even if he seems to recover? Should I think about replacing him now?"

I didn't hesitate a minute: "Mr. Secretary, there is no one else like Stephen Mather. I really believe he will recuperate, although no one knows exactly how rapidly, but no one else should take his place unless it is absolutely necessary. There really isn't anyone on earth like him."

He thought about this and said, "Do you think you can replace Mm?"

And I replied: "No, I just said there is only one Stephen Mather. I can certainly keep his place open, can surely do all that is necessary in the foreseeable future to try to obtain the necessary appropriations and to organize the National Park Service. That much I can promise you."

"But, Albright, you have told me repeatedly that you were going to leave the department as soon as a Park Service was created. Now what?"

"Well, that's just not in the cards," I said. "Not until the future of the service can be delineated, started up, and assured that plans Mr. Mather and I have formulated can be realized."

The secretary stood, put out his hand, and said: "We'll let it stand at that for the time being. It certainly isn't my choice to replace Steve, and I hope you will convey this to him until I can do it myself. Go ahead with whatever plans you and Steve have made, but just keep me informed. I'll keep everything you have told me today and what may come up in the future close to my chest."

In the future I assessed Franklin Lane in a different light because of his political intervention on conservation matters, but I always gave him credit for his decision at this time, and I was deeply grateful for his assurances. He could have called on any number of people, under political pressure, to replace Stephen Mather. But his friendship and trust fortunately made him give the right decision in 1917. It certainly gave me the needed boost of confidence.

Then the charade began of hiding Mather's true condition from the public eye. Dr. Weisenburg called to tell me that he had completed his studies of Mather. He said he was worn out, exceedingly nervous, and seriously depressed, which gave the most concern for his recovery.

The seriousness of his illness never got beyond the doctors, Mrs. Mather, Lane, and me. I was part of this conspiracy in 1917, and several other times through the years, to hide his mental problems. I always kept the papers concerning these at my home, in my own personal files. In later years, I often wondered whether I should destroy these records for the sake of his family, but was held back by the thought that, as a historian, I ought to save them. Was I right or not? Well, as I approach my century mark, it seems so far in the past that the whole story should now be related.

For the first few weeks, Mr. Mather's condition worsened. Twice his despondency caused him to attempt suicide. Once he broke away from his male nurse and tried to hurl himself down a flight of stairs. I don't know any details of this or the other attempt. It was not my policy to ask questions, just to wait until I was given the facts. However, by the end of January 1917, Mather was eating and sleeping normally, but was restless and constantly worrying. This was apparently the pattern of his former breakdown.

Mrs. Mather was optimistic. He had pulled out of that one. He could pull out of this one. One difference to her was the fact that he was more deeply immersed in the national parks than he had been in business in 1903. She felt strongly that he should be cut off from the Park Service forever.

Dr. Weisenburg totally disagreed. He felt Mather's salvation lay in healing him physically and then slowly reintroducing him to the only thing that seemed to interest him, national parks. He recommended that Mather be kept in isolation from everyone except his doctors and nurses until his depression had lifted. When that time arrived, he felt I was to be the first one allowed to visit. Mrs. Mather could see him afterward.

When Weisenburg told us this, I started to protest, but Mrs. Mather quickly agreed, saying, "Stephen always could be more at ease with men than with women."

The doctor replied: "It isn't men versus women. It's national parks versus anything you might bring up, Mrs. Mather. We have to go along with him, rivet his attention on the one thing that seems to be paramount in his mind at this time."

Back at the Interior Department, I consolidated Mather's and my work operations and tried to see any of our field personnel that were still in Washington. It was the only opportunity to discuss field problems, for there was no way I could get out of Washington in the foreseeable future.

I was lucky to find Washington B. Lewis, a popular fellow known as "Dusty," still sightseeing and roving around museums. Undoubtedly he was the most important superintendent to be brought into the park system, a superb engineer, another "steal" from the Geological Survey. He had taken over Yosemite in March 1916, had proved to be extremely capable, a master at dealing with the quarrelsome concessioners, and was already one of our trusted lieutenants. We had several long sessions together. I was so impressed with him that I decided to let him help me in the field and to try him on work outside of his own park.

One more thing I had to settle immediately was Bob Yard. The minute he learned that Mather had left Washington, he rightly guessed the truth of another breakdown and raced back from vacation, assuming that he would step into Mather's shoes. I had a long, careful talk with him, telling him that Lane had instructed me to take over Mather's job until further notice, that he was to continue his same work, that I would continue paying him from Mather's funds. Above all, he was to have no communication with Mather until Weisenburg gave permission.

Yard immediately circumvented me. He contacted Thorkildsen to try to see Mather and, failing that, attempted to write Mather. Fortunately, he sent the letter to Mrs. Mather to be forwarded. The letter was returned unopened. Next he wrote Mrs. Mather, pouring out a lot of tales about Washington affairs going badly and about how he was trying to fix them, but how he must talk with her husband. She was quite alarmed, sent me his letter, and appealed for help.

I sat Yard down and had another straightforward talk with him. "Bob, perhaps you didn't understand me the first time I told you Mr. Mather's situation. You went through his 1903 breakdown, and you know if doctor's orders aren't followed, it could be a disaster for our friend. Maybe a permanent disaster. Now I'm a lot younger than you, but I happen to be in charge here, and you will obey me or you will be released to go back to newspapering in New York. Believe me, and let's work together to accomplish what Mr. Mather would want us to do." I expected him to explode, but instead he quietly agreed.

By the middle of January every other problem had to be put aside as I was called to appear before the appropriations committees for our funds for fiscal year 1918. Mather's absence actually made it easier for me to testify, as the members knew and liked him. Then, too, I played on their sympathy for his tireless work and subsequent "exhaustion."

That was the Senate committee. The House committee was another matter. I had to spend nearly three days defending our estimates. The committee, as usual, handled me pretty roughly. Of course, the chairman was our old enemy, Fitzgerald the curmudgeon. He singled me out for a severe verbal beating because of unauthorized enterprises undertaken by both Mather and Marshall during 1916.

Fitzgerald regarded the removal of troops from Yellowstone under the plan worked out by Mather and General Hugh Scott, using the revenues of the park to cover the costs of the new ranger force, as unauthorized if not unlawful. He was determined to put the troops back in the park no matter what the cost in money and in men who might be needed for military service.

Furthermore, plans for the Yosemite power plant had been changed to such an extent that a large deficiency had been incurred. Fitzgerald blamed Marshall and Mather and was furious. As though it was all my fault, he roared at me in the same vein he had used the year before: "Albright, that power plant will remain in Yosemite forever, as is, and I

hope it will always be there to rust as a monument to the incompetency of you men running the national parks."

The Sixty-fourth Congress adjourned on March 4, 1917, without taking any action on the appropriations. It was a real blow, as I thought I'd have to go through this whole thing again with the next Congress. Fortunately, I didn't have to give testimony again, and the bill passed in June pretty much as we had requested except for Fitzgerald's insistence that troops return to Yellowstone.

This wasn't the only financial ordeal. A more urgent problem was emergency appropriations in the Deficiency Bill, the only avenue to get money to operate the Park Service until regular appropriations were forthcoming for the fiscal year. Lane roared with laughter when I reported that I had "crawled on my knees in sack cloth and ashes," begging for the money. Ever after he would tease me, when I asked for anything, by calling me "Old Sack Cloth and Ashes."

The Deficiency Bill finally passed on April 17 and provided for deficiencies in appropriations for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1917. That is, it covered appropriations for the Washington office for the period April 15 to June 30, 1917. It certainly wasn't much to go on, but something was better than the nothing we'd been operating on since the Park Service was authorized in August 1916.

One bright spot occurred on February 26. Mount McKinley, in Alaska, was created a national park. We had been working on this for some time with the Boone and Crockett Club, which was trying to save the Dall sheep and other wildlife for which the region was famous.

Sadly, McKinley was treated like our other new parks, Lassen and Hawaii. No money was made available to staff, operate, or improve them. Not a red cent to hire a superintendent and rangers. Nothing for protection of the wild animals (and there was unlimited hunting of them by poachers). Nothing to make it possible for visitors to enjoy the wonders of volcanic activity and the magnificent Alaskan wilderness.

One of the problems in operating the bureau was my inability to get anything printed. I had learned a lot of bureaucratic tricks in my years around the government and decided to use one that other bureaus did. Whatever they wanted printed, they would get it introduced as a bill or have a congressman make a speech about their topic. Consequently, it was published in the *Congressional Record* and was printed in vast quantities.

On March 3, 1917, the day the Sixty-fourth Congress was to adjourn, I brought up a batch of things I wanted printed to Representative Billy Kent of California. I explained: "Billy, I'm in a real fix. Haven't a nickel to get these articles I wrote printed up. They're really important, especially the stuff I wrote urging the creation of the Grand Canyon National Park. I need to send them out all over the country to rally support for the project."

That's as far as I got. Billy was feeling very jolly, largely as a result of end-of-the-session liquid celebration. He quickly grasped what I had come for, gave me a healthy swat on the back that almost knocked me down, and roared: "You old coon, you know I'm always ready to do anything for the National Park Service. Let's make this Grand Canyon a national park. Hey, let's make the whole damn country a national park and introduce a bill to abolish Congress."

On February 27 I received a letter from Dr. Weisenburg that made my day. He wrote that Mr. Mather seemed well enough to allow me to visit him. With Congress adjourned and the Wilson inauguration hoopla concluded, there was an opening to slip away from Washington. I made plans to go to Philadelphia on March 7 and thence on to Devon to see Mr. Mather.

I had the blessing of Secretary Lane. He said, "I want this whole episode of Mather's illness kept under wraps." He made it clear that the position of director of the National Park Service was still open. Mather had not been appointed to it because of the seriousness of his illness. It followed that if his breakdown leaked out, there would be political pressure to fill the directorship with someone else. Lane concluded with, "Albright, this is just between the two of us, our secret to keep."

After spending the night at a hotel in Philadelphia, I met with Dr. Weisenburg at his office and had a long, fruitful discussion. He gave me a detailed report on Mather, going over every fact he knew from his birth to the present morning. He even made a phone call to Devon, before I had arrived, checking on Mather's immediate condition.

It was a tragic story of this brilliant, creative, and successful man who was burdened with a mental condition that could burst upon him, without warning, when fatigue and stress mounted. In the light of contemporary knowledge, his condition might be labeled manic depression. His energy and exuberance, which accomplished so many great things, could turn to deep, silent, suicidal depression with little warning. In 1917 treatment was a program of isolation from the outside world

coupled with a regimen of plenty of sleep, a nourishing diet, and regular exercise. Above all, no excitement, no problems.

"Weisenburg explained why I was the first one to be allowed to visit. Mather had requested me, not only because he said I was "the one he trusted above all others," but because his sole interest at this point was the national parks. Mrs. Mather endorsed this move, as she felt I would have the judgment to filter what Park Service news could be discussed and what should be withheld. Weisenburg grimly warned me, though, that I had a tremendous responsibility to maintain a balance between giving Mather news of the Park Service for which he hungered and yet not divulging anything controversial or upsetting.

Devon bore no resemblance to a hospital. It was a lovely, large home tucked into green lawns and lush forested land. When I arrived, I was immediately taken down a long carpeted hallway to Mr. Mather's suite of rooms. They consisted of a large, brilliantly sunny sitting room with a rather Spartan but warmly pleasant bedroom painted yellow and a bathroom with tub and massage table branching off to the side. The sitting room was furnished with comfortable chairs covered in pale green, a few side tables, and Mather's own small desk from his Chicago bedroom. The only decorations were two framed pictures of Yosemite, which I learned that Mrs. Mather had relayed to him as a gift from Dusty Lewis. I noticed immediately that the glass had been removed from the frames. I also checked and was relieved to see that there was no evidence of windows with bars. I had dreaded the thought that this free spirit could have been cooped up like an animal.

As I entered the room, Mather jumped to his feet, bounded forward, and gave me a bear hug. "Horace, how wonderful to see you," he said. As he stepped back, I saw tears on his cheeks, his hands shaking, how close to the surface were his emotions, how difficult it was for him to control himself. I guess I might have had tears in my eyes too, as I saw how incredibly better he looked, physically strong and healthy, with his old animated expression and shining blue eyes. It hardly seemed possible that the frightened, shaking, dispirited shade of a man two months ago had been replaced by a vigorous, smiling figure.

Weisenburg had warned me that physical appearance meant nothing. "Take special, gentle care of his fragile mental condition. He is not at all well yet."

Mather excitedly threw a barrage of questions at me. "Did McCormick get his OK on the rail line? How fares the Desmond Company? What

about our appropriations? How did Fitzgerald act?" It was wonderful that he had such a recall of our problems, and yet I had been forbidden by Weisenburg to discuss anything controversial. Because of such a flow of questions, I had time to pick out one to answer, and I chose the good news, Mount McKinley National Park. I had brought the bill passed by the Congress as well as a stack of photos of the park and congratulatory letters to him from various sources across the country. It immediately diverted him. We kept up our conversation on one thing after another, all very light and inconclusive. Things were going perfectly.

Then I inadvertently mentioned Bob Marshall's help on some road and trail planning in Mount Rainier. Bob Marshall! From being a happy, talkative Mather, he erupted from his chair, pounding back and forth the length of the room, calling out Marshall's name and denouncing himself and his treatment of Marshall in the worst possible terms. Although totally alarmed, I fortunately didn't have to cope with the situation. The male nurse quickly signaled me to leave and gently but forcibly steered Mather toward the bedroom.

In a few minutes the nurse reappeared and suggested that I go to the kitchen to have something to eat, and he'd get back to me. He did very shortly, telling me he had administered a mild sedative to Mather, that I could go back now to say good-bye. Mather was quite calm once more though disinclined to talk. However, he sat quietly and listened to me for perhaps another fifteen minutes. I was nervous about his silence.

He loved jokes, so I quickly dredged one up. I still remember it was about Mesa Verde. It seems some woman tourist was walking around an old cliff dwelling there, listening to the guide explain what an incredible civilization the ancient Anasazi had built here. Suddenly she inquired, "Well, if these people were so marvelous, why did they build their towns so far from the railroad?" Mather loved it, slapped his knee, and roared with laughter. I left him on this high note, promising to come back very soon.

On March 17 I wrapped up my work and caught the train for Philadelphia once more, again spending the night at the hotel. The next day I spent over eight hours with Mr. Mather. I determinedly steered him away from current events and problems but had long talks about the future, such as what glorious things we would do when we got the Grand Canyon into the Park Service.

The most gratifying time came when Mather's nurse wheeled in a projector and screen. I had brought motion pictures of the 1915 Mather

Mountain Party. While it was shown, he laughed, recounted anecdotes, and pointed out scenic features. When it came to an end, he said, "Oh, this is wonderful. Show it again." We showed it again, and again, and I think a fourth again.

My joy didn't last long. I received a short note from Dr. Weisenburg telling me that my visit had been a little strenuous for Mather. He didn't blame me, saying that it was difficult to hold him down now that he was somewhat better. "Any sustained effort on his part tires him and then, of course, causes the consequent depression." I felt terrible, even if I apparently wasn't to blame.

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WAR. It changed everything. For the nation, the National Park Service, and me personally. On April 6, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany and its allies. The majority of Americans had believed Wilson during the recent presidential campaign when he had promised to keep us out of the war. That had been the key to his defeat of Hughes. But now patriotic fervor swept the nation, and the United States was off to make the world safe for democracy.

For the National Park Service, the war held up many things Mather and I had in the works or had planned. However, in view of the fact that I was now alone and solely responsible for the bureau, it did enable me to slow down, contemplate, and quietly formulate policy and operations.

As for the immediate situation, my first order of business was to have a complete review of the national park war policy with Secretary Lane. I offered my resignation as acting director, a position to which he had just appointed me. I outlined my military background in college and my qualifications for an appointment as an officer in the army. At heart I loved the military, and in spirit I was perhaps overly patriotic. I really wanted to enlist as soon as possible and see service in France. Lane, listening passively as usual, let me pour out my emotional presentation.

When I had exhausted my rhetoric and oxygen, he quietly said: "No, Albright, you can't be spared to play soldier. You know the government of the United States not only has to be a white knight in armor and save the world, but we also have to operate and preserve the nation at home. A war can't be run without soldiers and a government can't be run without competent men. I'm sending in the proper papers to exempt you from wartime service."

I tried to change his mind. It was a dead end. He stopped me then and closed me off throughout the war. Gradually I came around to his thinking that with Mather incapacitated perhaps he had no replacement for me, and valuable men in the Park Service, like Dusty Lewis, were also irreplaceable. I ended up talking many men of this type out of enlisting or freezing them in their government positions.

I always regretted not serving my country in wartime, but my Grace certainly didn't. Philosophically, she bordered on being a pro-draft dodger if necessary to keep me safely home with her. However, she was the first to volunteer her service through the Interior Department and was soon appointed the head of its ladies' service division.

Although I was frantically busy in those first few weeks of war activity, I felt I had to respond to Dr. Weisenburg's urgent summons to see Mr. Mather. He reported that Mather was terribly upset by the advent of war, frightened, and worried over the national parks. "You must come quickly and reassure him," Dr. Weisenburg telegraphed, "or I am fearful for a serious setback in his condition."

So on April 15 I entrained for Philadelphia, had a few hours of consultation with Dr. Weisenburg, and spent a good portion of the sixteenth at Devon with Mather. Indeed, he was in a fearful state, pacing back and forth, wringing his hands, and deeply depressed. He fretted over what effect the war would have on the parks and our plans for them. I tried to let him talk it out, but he became more and more agitated. Finally, I linked arms with him, slowing his walking down, quietly explaining that our department was being virtually ignored, that if any problems arose in the future, Lane and I could handle them. Nothing to worry about.

The male nurse had slipped away and now returned with large iced glasses of lemonade, Mather's favorite beverage. Mather sat down, sipping his drink, quiet and subdued. It never ceased to astound me how he flipped from one mood to the other in a matter of minutes.

On May 9, 1917, Secretary Lane formalized Mather's and my positions. There were now funds from the Deficiency Bill to pay salaries and organize the bureau. Furthermore, Lane felt confident enough about Mather's future recovery to have him approved as director of the National Park Service and myself as assistant director. At the same time, I was officially designated acting director during Mather's absence. There was one slight hitch. Both the directorship and assistant directorship called for men in civil service, and Mather and I did not have civil service status. Secretary Lane simply went to President Wilson and asked him to

waive the rules and appoint us directly because of our knowledge and experience in park affairs.

However, when I happily broke the good news to Mather, he rejected the position. He said he wasn't well enough to become director now and probably would never be strong enough in the future to take on the burdens of the office. Mrs. Mather agreed, feeling strongly that the job would kill him sooner or later.

Weisenburg felt that Mather had to accept the position, to have an interest that would bring him back to physical and mental health. I finally had to promise Mather I would remain as assistant director for a year or longer if necessary. Only then did he agree to let Lane go ahead with his appointment. My appointment was May 9, Mather's May 16.

There was one thing connected with my new appointment that I had to settle. Heretofore, Mather had been paying me two hundred dollars a month over my government salary. Then when I was promoted to assistant attorney in the Interior Department, with a salary of two thousand dollars, I asked Mather to dispense with his allowance, but instead he merely lowered it to one thousand dollars a year. Now I discussed the situation with him in light of my new position as assistant director. I insisted that he dispense with his monthly stipend, and he calmly agreed he would do so as soon as my new salary kicked in.

As it turned out, Mather secretly instructed his attorney, Oliver Mitchell, to keep me on at one thousand a year. When Mitchell sent me the usual check to handle Mather's financial affairs in Washington, he always included the monthly allowance for Yard and me. When I noticed that he was still doing this, I wrote him that Mather wanted mine stopped.

Back came the letter with Mather's instructions in it as well as the cryptic comment from Mitchell that I deserved the money far more than Yard. Mitchell added, "To what extent is Mr. Mather obligated to retain Mr. Yard?"

I answered: "So far as I know, Mr. Mather is not obligated to retain Mr. Yard at all. The obligation, as I understand it, was to employ him here for two years. Certainly there is no written obligation to retain Mr. Yard. Personally, I do not think he is doing work of a character that a man commanding a salary of \$650 per month should do."

Liking Bob Yard personally, though, I suggested to Mitchell that we let the matter drift along until Mather was well enough to handle the situation himself. It was far too delicate for us when we had no real guidelines to follow. Mitchell replied that it might not be a good idea to leave

the problem in Mather's hands. "I'm not sure if he will be in condition to undertake the unpleasant duty of tying a can to Mr. Yard. . . . Candidly I think we would be doing Mr. Mather the greatest kindness if we would dispose of the Yard matter."

I prevailed, insisting that Yard stay until Mather might be well enough to go over the situation quietly and thoroughly. After all, Yard was one of Mather's oldest friends, best man at his wedding, and a very volatile fellow too. Mather couldn't take any excitement of the type Yard conceivably could arouse.

As for my financial dilemma, Mather cleaned the situation up in a letter to me on May 6: "I want to continue to pay you \$1,000 a year after you get your new government salary as assistant director."